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By
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The Confessional Bogey!

ON the occasion of the great Eucharistic Congress in Chicago a few years ago, one of the ambitions of the Cardinal Archbishop who was sponsoring that magnificent demonstration of faith was that on the opening Sunday of the festivities at least a million Holy Communions should be received in the Archdiocese. As a fact his zealous ambition was more than realized. Incidental to those million Holy Communions, innumerable confessions were heard the day before not only in the Chicago churches but almost any place in the city where this might be decently and becomingly done. Strangers that evening visiting the old Chicago Coliseum, scene of so many famous political, social and religious gatherings, would have been edified, if Catholics, and astonished, if non-Catholics, to observe the vast crowds of men and women informally approaching the tribunal of Penance in the temporary confessionals set up there for their accommodation, mostly nothing more than a chair for the priest and a box or table for the kneeling penitent to rest against.

Calumnies Refuted

This episode is noted as a prelude to discussing the confessional bogey because it is a powerfully telling refutation of any number of traditional calumnies associated in the minds of many non-Catholics regarding the practice of confession-making. Here was the clear-cut answer to those who maintain that in the Catholic Church it is only women and children who confess. Here the closest and most critical observer would have found no evidence, for there was none, of innocent little ones being corrupted, of priests receiving money for the absolutions they gave, of advantage being taken by them of the sacramental relation to debauch women, or of unfortunate psychic or hysteric reactions on the part of penitents who had just gone through the "ordeal" of unburdening their consciences to a man. Here were no least signs of priest-ridden, ignorant, uncouth men and women, victims of some medieval superstition. Many of the penitents may have been poor, but all were people with the stamp of Catholic culture and refinement upon

them. They had come from the four quarters of the world, and represented every age and both sexes and a wide variety of languages and nationalities, and without any compulsion but with the utmost spontaneity, they were seeking the forgiveness of their sins and peace with God through that quiet of conscience which Catholic confession promises.

To an intelligent man it is almost unbelievable that so many obviously absurd notions about so simple a thing as the Catholic confessional could be prevalently widespread. Yet while the Church is misunderstood and misrepresented on many points and about many phases of her doctrine and discipline, somehow this is singled out as a very special object of attack. Ask almost any non-Catholic what his idea of the confessional is and note what reaction you get. While most have swallowed the scandalous tales about its origin and abuses that the sixteenth-century Reformers so virulently spewed out, few have been courageous enough to read an impartial history of the Church's polity about confession, or to ask any practical Catholic friend or neighbor what he or she got out of going to confession, much less even to make an inspection of one of the confessional boxes in any of our churches. The phenomenon is not easy to explain but a Protestant tradition of four hundred years has had its effect and the confessional "bogey" is today one of the most popular, if not the most dangerous, of the stumbling-blocks which stand in the way of the Catholic religion being appreciated and submitted to by the American public.

What the Church Teaches

While it might be more interesting to refute at once the commoner objections against confession as taught and practiced in the Church, and especially in so far as they touch the abuses, real or imaginary, associated with it, any consideration of it is bound to be both more logical which starts with an exposition of what Catholicism really holds and teaches about it. Accordingly this process shall be adopted here.

The Church's position about the whole question is quite brief and simple. In the Catholic theological scheme, confession is but one of the elements of the Sacrament of Pen-

nance which is part of the Christian sacramental system. For its adequate understanding, consequently, something must be said about the Sacrament of Penance itself.

It is a dogmatic teaching in the Catholic Church that her Divine Founder left her in the clearest possible language in the Holy Scripture the power of forgiving sins committed after Baptism, and that from the nature of that grant and the terms under which it was made there can be no doubt but that its administration was to be associated with what we now speak of technically as auricular confession. This position is confirmed by the historical fact that from apostolic times confession was a usage in vogue in the Church, a factor, incidentally, that creates more than presumptive ground for maintaining its Divine institution, even were there no Scriptural texts to justify it, since the apostolic and post-apostolic churchmen were peculiarly careful that innovations should not creep into the Christian Tradition.

Definition

Penance, when Catholics speak of the Sacrament, may be defined as the external sign instituted by Jesus Christ whereby through the absolution of the priest the sins of the repenting penitent committed after Baptism are forgiven, and sanctifying grace which was lost through them is restored to the soul.

The Scriptural Mandate

Express Biblical warrant for the Sacrament is found in the twentieth chapter of St. John's Gospel (xx: 19-23). The Evangelist is there occupied with narrating some of the incidents of the first Easter Sunday. After recounting the apparition of the Risen Saviour to Mary Magdalen he goes on to say:

> Now when it was late that same day, the first of the week, and the doors were shut where the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them: Peace be to you.
>
> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord.
>
> He said therefore to them again: Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent me I also send you.
>
> When he had said this, he breathed on them: and he said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost.

Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.

Here, the Church contends, is an explicit and unmistakable commission to the Apostles to forgive or retain sins. A person would think long and hard if he intended to communicate such a power to another, to find simpler, clearer, or more expressive terms to indicate his purpose.

The Text Analyzed

"*Whose* sins you shall forgive." The pronoun *whose* shows the scope of the grant. No Christian who sins is to be excluded from the benefit of the rite Our Lord is instituting. The Sacrament is to be for the assistance and consolation of all His followers and its minister is to be no respecter of persons.

"Whose *sins* you shall forgive." There is no limitation, either, to the number or kind of transgressions that may be pardoned. On the one hand, it matters not how heinous or malicious a sin may be, it still falls within the range of sacramental absolution; and on the other, how often soever one may have received the Sacrament and how numerous soever his offenses may be, the text suggests that he may still be forgiven. That this was certainly Christ's intention becomes clearer when one recalls His reply to St. Peter's query as to how often injuries should be forgiven. St. Matthew records the incident (xviii: 21). Should His followers, the Apostle asked, be so generous as to pardon offenses seven times? The Lord's answer was, "I say not to thee till seven times, but till seventy times seven times,"—in other words, indefinitely.

Real Sins Forgiven

There is question, moreover, in the text, of real sins not of something for which the word is used occasionally and metaphorically as the effects of sin, its penalties, as some of the older Protestant theologians maintained. In this connection it might be advantageously recalled that whenever a person offends God seriously two things happen in the soul: guilt is incurred for the evil done, that is, the transgressor has literally become a murderer, an adulterer, a blasphemer, which he was not before; and in the second

place the wrong-doer renders himself liable to the penalty of hell-fire eternally for his misdeed. The power that Our Lord was here conferring on the Apostles was to remit the sins themselves. No one has any legitimate right to depart from the natural and obvious meaning of His words and read something else into them. The Catholic position is that the direct primary purpose of the Sacrament of Penance is to absolve the sinner from his guilt. When it has been received he is no longer a murderer, or adulterer, or blasphemer. The sin does not exist any longer; it has been wiped out; a real change has taken place in the soul; he is innocent. As for the penalty, one of the effects of the Sacrament is simultaneously to reduce the eternal punishment incurred through the sin to a temporal one which will be compensated for either immediately by the more perfect subjective dispositions of the penitent, or subsequently whether by his personally inflicted penitential acts in this life or by the Divinely imposed pains of Purgatory hereafter.

"Whose sins *you* shall forgive." Obviously the commission is to the Apostles, not to the Church at large. Christ is speaking to them. He has just told them, "As the Father hath sent me I also send you." The Father had sent Him to redeem the human race; He was sending them to be His special cooperators in that Divine redemptive work. They were to be the officials in His Church and as the remission of sin implies an exercise of authority and is consequently an official act, it was to be a prerogative strictly reserved to them and their successors. For just as all Christ's gifts to His Apostles which were not clearly for their own personal benefit or aggrandizement but for the common weal of His followers were to remain with His Church and be transmitted to their successors in the priesthood, so was this forgiving power.

Absolution No Metaphor

"Whose sins you shall *forgive*." Only one logical meaning can be attached to that word *forgive*, namely, that Our Lord is communicating genuine, literal, absolving power to His Apostles. There is nothing to warrant the inference that He is merely making them official announcers of what

He has previously done, giving them the right to declare forgiven what He has already actually forgiven. That is another of the traditional Protestant interpretations of the text. The grant is decidedly absolute and unconditional. And as if to emphasize these characteristics Christ adds that what the Apostles forgive on earth shall be forgiven in heaven—not the reverse. He binds Himself and His Father to ratify their act, and that without any qualifications or ambiguities. It is as if a man were to designate an agent to act in his stead for a business deal and confer on him wide discretionary power binding himself antecedently and unreservedly to abide by the acts of his agent.

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; *and* whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." It is important to note that the Apostles are receiving from Christ an alternative and disjunctive power: they may either forgive or retain. It is precisely from the method which Our Lord used in instituting the Sacrament of Penance that the Church deduces as a corollary the Scriptural necessity of auricular confession.

It may be readily conceded to those who quibble over words that Christ nowhere explicity says, "Go to confession if you want your sins forgiven." Confession doesn't seem to have been in His vocabulary in that sense. But He unquestionably says the equivalent. Words, after all, are only labels for thoughts and things. We are continually giving new names to old objects. Languages develop and may change but the essence and nature of things does not change. Call a man an undertaker or mortician, his job is still to prepare the dead for burial. Racketeering is only a twentieth-century tag for an ancient vice, and companionate marriage a modern euphemism for what our hardy ancestors more honestly called concubinage. So men are not to argue to Christ's institution or non-institution of confession from the presence or absence of that particular word in that particular meaning in the Gospels.

A Judicial Power

It is to be noted that when Our Lord communicated the power either to forgive or to retain sin in the discretionary way in which He did, He was clearly constituting the

Apostles judges and establishing a judicial process. Now in every judicial criminal process with which we are acquainted, before a judge can render a decision or a jury find a verdict, he or they must be acquainted with the issues —there must be a charge or indictment, a plea of guilty or not-guilty, and a presentation of evidence. Analogously it is unreasonable to think or talk about forgiving or not forgiving a fault when one hasn't any knowledge of its nature or implications, or of the dispositions of the person to be pardoned. It follows, therefore, that for the rational and proper use of the discretionary power which the Sacrament of Penance gives him Christ's minister must be acquainted with the issues involved, the pros and cons, so to say, of the case. And since sin is fundamentally an internal act, an act of man's will, and guilt and responsibility are secrets of the conscience of the sinner, it stands to reason that the penitent himself must make his faults externally manifest before the priest can pass judgment on them. He must accordingly confess and accuse himself of his misdeeds, explain his responsibility, acknowledge his sorrow and his purpose of amendment. Priests are not by virtue of their sacerdotal vocation or ordination mind or heart readers. Reduced to its simplest terms, all this is but saying that the sinner must make a confession.

Circumstances of Christ's Grant

Christ's words are clarified and get added significance from the salutation with which He preludes the grant He is making: "Peace be to you." He repeats it twice for He is about to establish a Sacrament of reconciliation, of peace between God and man.

The Scriptural reference to His breathing upon the Apostles and the injunction, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost," also suggests a pertinent thought to reinforce the Catholic position. Commenting on this the Rev. Fulgentius Meyer, O.F.M., writes:

> This was a most unusual ceremony, and therefore conveyed a deep and consequential meaning. Once before God had breathed on His creature. It was in Paradise when, after He had formed the body of Adam from the clay of the earth, He breathed an immortal soul into it. In other words, the breath of the Almighty, produced

in man something that resembled God Himself, that was an image and likeness of His own substance, and that was to endure forever. Such was the effect of the breathing of God.

Now again God breathes and His breath is to produce another Divine effect. By His breath Jesus imparts to the Apostles and their successors His very Spirit, and with His Spirit He communicates His own power, a power that the infinite God alone possesses, the power to forgive sins.

Who can forgive sins but God alone? said the Jews one day chidingly to Jesus. Our Lord admitted their contention but this power which He had as God He delegated to His Apostles as He breathed upon them on the day of His Resurrection.

Loosing and Binding

Besides St. John's words which we have just analyzed, there is another Scripture text that lends weight to the Church's claim to the right to forgive sins and to the method of its exercise. We are told by St. Matthew (xvi: 13-19) that when Christ gave St. Peter the so-called power of the keys at Cæsarea Philippi He included in His gift the fullest legislative, judicial and executive prerogatives, for He added: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsover thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven." On another occasion these same words were addressed to the entire apostolic college. When examined, they, too, clearly indicate a broad discretionary grant to Peter and his co-workers that implies a judicial process for its adequate and rational exercise. Had we not the more specific commission about sins recorded in the Fourth Gospel this more generic and universal grant would be amply sufficient to justify, on Scriptural grounds, the Catholic doctrine and practice of Penance and confession.

The Incarnation for Sinners

Incidentally there is a strong a-prioristic argument for the Catholic position in the fact that Our Lord Himself assumed human nature primarily to obtain for man pardon for his sins, and that paralleling His teaching and preaching He habitually forgave sins. "I am come," He once said (Lk. v: 31), "not to call the just but sinners." The episodes of the woman taken in adultery, of Mary Mag-

dalen in Simon's house, and of the paralytic that was cured, all illustrate this point. St. Mark recounts (ii: 1) that once when a crowd was begging Him to heal a sick man of the palsy He said, "Man, thy sins are forgiven thee," and when His enemies, the Pharisees, reproached Him for His seeming blasphemy He retorted: "Which is easier to say to the sick of the palsy: thy sins are forgiven thee, or to say: Arise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy) I say to thee, Arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house." All this clearly implies that forgiving sins was a distinct part of the mission of the Incarnate Word, and since that mission was to be carried on after His Ascension until the end of time, men ought to expect to find some avenue and medium of absolution from sin in the Church which He would found.

Penance a Natural Need

We have another presumptive argument for Penance and confession, apart from any explicit textual or traditional warrant for them. Should we not naturally anticipate that Our Lord would make some provision for the poor unfortunate who after Baptism has fallen into evil ways? Better than anyone else He knew the weakness and fickleness of human nature consequent on man's inheritance of original sin. Better than anyone else He, too, knew that man would want a means of reconciliation with God when he fell a victim to his depraved nature. And better than anyone else, also, He knew, finally, that that human nature of man's would demand some external sign and evidence of his forgiveness in order to be assured beyond a doubt that he had been restored fully to God's friendship of which his sin had deprived him. Man doesn't merely want to think or believe or hope that he has been pardoned; he wants to know it, and only some such institution as the Catholic tribunal of Penance could afford such knowledge with an added guarantee of its certainty. Surely, then, we may well anticipate that the wisdom and goodness and power of Our Divine Lord would have found some way of satisfying that natural longing of the human heart.

Confession Obligatory

That confession is not an optional devotional practice but obligatory for the sinner is evident from the absurdity that would follow in any other hypothesis. To assume that Christ established Penance and gave His Apostles the power to remit sins, and jurisdiction over the penitent, and simultaneously to assume that He did not mean for the sinner to subject himself to the Apostles or that confession would not be enforceable, is to make the God-Man the institutor of a ridiculous inanity. Rights and duties are always correlative. If a parent has the right to command a child, automatically the child has the reciprocal obligation to heed that parental injunction. He would indeed be considered a fool of a store-manager who would commission one of his subalterns to inspect the sales-books of his employes if he did not implicitly intend that the men would submit their books to his representative for inspection.

How perfectly futile Christ's institution would have been on the assumption that confession were an altogether optional matter may be further seen by reflecting on the natural reluctance people have to revealing their shortcomings so that we may be sure that if the obligation of confession did not follow from the nature of the Sacrament and its method of administration, few if any would ever receive it. Confession, therefore, is not a mere matter of ecclesiastical precept like many of the ceremonies associated with the administration of the Sacraments, but is itself a Divinely imposed obligation for the sinner who wishes to obtain pardon. In Christ's plan it is not only *a* means of procuring forgiveness but *the* essential means.

Tradition

To complement the Scriptural and aprioristic arguments which justify Penance and confession, and in order that their discussion may be adequate, some reference should here be made to the history and Tradition of the Church regarding the actual exercise of the Sacrament and particularly regarding the practice of confession itself. The subject is a large one and not without its complicating phases. However, a brief survey should suffice for the present purpose.

Needless to say our contemporary confessional-boxes did not exist in apostolic times. Neither do we find in the writings of the early churchmen any such expression as "going to confession" or "saying one's penance." These are, admittedly, relatively modern phrases for the penitential process. Nor are there any first-century liturgical or ritualistic evidences of the existence of the tribunal of Penance as we have of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. But, after all, a clear distinction must always be made and kept in any study of the Sacrament of Penance between essentials and non-essentials, between mere incidental customs, rites and ceremonies which surround its administration and the substantial communication of the power and privilege of effectually sitting in judgment on sinners.

In this connection, however, it may be profitably noted that the relative rareness of allusions to confession in early Church history and the comparative silence among writers about it is readily explicable by the fact that the first Christians probably used Penance less than we do. Mostly converts, they were ordinarily baptized late in life, and conscious of the significance of what being a Christian meant, they were much more in earnest than many contemporary Catholics are about not relapsing into serious sin after they had been received into the Church. In addition, "devotional" confessions, which so many of ours now are, that is, confessions whose content is only venial sin or some already forgiven mortal sin, were not in common usage, with the result that references to confession would thus be naturally fewer.

Public Penitential Discipline

A further difficulty attending the historical evidence of the practice of auricular confession in the early Church arises from the existence side by side with it, quite generally, of a public penitential discipline regulating the reconciliation of great public sinners, especially those guilty of apostacy, murder or fornication, with God and the Church. The result is that it is not always easy to differentiate in early writings between these practices and sacramental Penance and secret confession.

At the same time every century affords its quota of

patristic witnesses for the existence in Christ's Church of the power to forgive sins and for the actual use of that power. The Catholic Encyclopedia or any standard Catholic theology will afford ample quotations from the writings of the early Fathers to demonstrate this proposition. In the fourth and fifth centuries St. Augustine, St. Jerome and St. Ambrose are most explicit about the Sacrament; in the second and third, Cyprian, Origin, Tertullian and Irenæus can all be adduced, not to mention the first-century Polycarp, disciple of the Apostle St. John, St. Clement of Rome, and the unknown author of the "Pastor Hermes."

So far we have justified for the Church the power to forgive sins and the necessity of auricular confession from both Scripture and Tradition. It is time now to examine the common Protestant theological teachings urged again it.

The Old Protestant Attitude

Until the Reformation, while there were errors among the Montanists and Novations about the extent of the absolving power, and among the later Cathari and Waldenses as to where the right to forgive resided in the Church, whether with the laity or bishops or priests, and whether these latter required in addition to sacred Orders also jurisdiction and the state of grace to exercise that power, hardly anyone ever questioned that the Church could actually remit sin. Wyclif, however, a forerunner of the Reformation, taught that "if a man be duly contrite, all exterior confession is superfluous and useless."

Protestant symbolic writings generally recognize but two Sacraments—Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Luther, in his attitude about Penance and confession was never consistent. In his "Little Catechism" and in the "Apologia" of the Augsburg Confession he mentions as a third Sacrament, "absolution, which is the Sacrament of Penance," and inculcated its necessity. He and his followers, however, understood by absolution a "bare declaration" of pardon and not the real effecting of forgiveness through the priestly act. Later in 1528 he declared that the Faithful are not obliged to confess their sins. Sometimes he extolled confession and then again he denounced it as "a bloody rack of conscience."

Once he wrote: "I would not for all the treasures of the world give up private confession for I know what strength and comfort it has been to me. . . . Indeed the devil would long ago have done for me had it not been for confession."

Calvin took the stand that Penance was merely a free institution established by the Church, and a repetition of Baptism, so that there was no essential difference between the two. He attributed its origin to Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). While he taught originally that people troubled in conscience might be advised to confess their sins in private, he took the stand in later life that confession was a pestilential abuse which ought to be swept from the face of the earth. In time his view came to be the popularly accepted one.

Justification by Faith

The better to appreciate its significance one should recall the original Protestant theory of justification. According to the orthodox Lutheran teaching, Baptism did not blot out sins, whether original or actual; it merely covered them up, so to say, with the merits of Christ, as a cloak covers the body. As for sins committed subsequent to Baptism, they might be similarly "covered up," if the penitent would but piously recall the grace of Baptism. Hence, to use one of Luther's own expressions, Penance is purely a "return [*regressus*] to Baptism," and nothing more than a cloaking of sin effected by fiduciary faith in the virtue of Baptism. Under this system only two things remained of the Catholic Sacrament of Penance, contrition (in the sense, incidentally, of the dread with which conscience is smitten when convinced of sin—*terrores conscientiæ*) and fiduciary faith in the sense of a recourse to Baptism.

By extension, some of the early Protestants also taught that what Christ conveyed to His Apostles in St. John's text was nothing more than the power to preach the Gospel, an interpretation that obviously does violence to the words of the Evangelist, though consistently in accord with the doctrine of justification by faith. Some few others among their theologians held that there was question of concupiscence, sin itself being with many of them nothing more than concupiscence, though this explanation is no more logical or

convincing than the former, since concupiscence never leaves man in this life and even the Saints of God and the newly baptized, notwithstanding their being in sanctifying grace, are subject to it.

Contemporary Protestants

Contemporary Protestants have no uniform attitude about Penance and confession any more than they have about most of the dogmas of religion. High-church Anglicans and Episcopalians believe in and practice auricular confession but it is not compulsory. The Lutherans and some of the other sects think it sufficient that the congregation make some sort of general confession or admission of guilt, such as Catholics themselves make when they recite the "Confiteor." Modernists, of course, altogether reject confession as a Divine institution.

It was the hatred of everything Roman among the early Reformers and the evolution of their own theories about Penance that was responsible for the origin and growth of what we now know as the confessional bogey. Not satisfied with scientifically attacking the Catholic doctrine as either unscriptural or unhistorical, recourse was had to mud-slinging. Confession was represented as a prolific occasion of the worst kinds of abuses, the confessional as a sort of necessary evil, almost like a house of prostitution, and confessors themselves as professionally devils incarnate.

Objections against Penance

Without going into these charges in detail they may be cumulatively listed under a few headings.

With pharisaical concern for the glory of God some objectors against confession base their attitude on the seeming usurpation by man of the place of God. It is true that in absolving from sin the priest who is a mere man does profess to do a Divine act, for it belongs to God alone to remit offenses against Him, but nevertheless if Christ actually gave him that power why should anybody reasonably consider him a usurper? The objection is a quibble.

If it be objected that the power of forgiving sins is a

tremendous one for God to put into the hands of His creatures, this may be granted, but it does not override the fact. It merely manifests more abundantly His infinite goodness to man and His tender mercy to the sinner when He makes forgiveness so easy and accessible. Besides, the absolving power is far less than the power to consecrate the bread and wine.

Confession and Psychology

We are told, again, that confession is bad psychologically. The facility with which forgiveness can apparently be obtained tends to minimize the idea of the Faithful about the seriousness of sin and the impression is created that they can sin vigorously, if only they later go through the rite and formality of confessing. On the other hand, it is said confession makes pious souls scrupulous about their sins. From either angle the objection is not sound. While confession may afford an opportunity for scrupulous people to manifest their scrupulosity, it does not of itself either cause or encourage it, and as for enhancing chances and opportunities for sin, everybody who knows anything at all about confession understands that it would be absolutely invalid unless the penitent were determined to reform his life, and this purpose of amendment far from being an easy incentive to sin is just what is needed by most people to counteract temptation, especially temptation to secret sins. Many a weakling has found the thought of the necessity of confession a bulwark against slipping into grievious sin under stress of temptation, when nature was crying for satisfaction and the heart was cold to the love of God and the intellect blind to the fear of hell. Rather it should be said in favor of confession that it is an excellent help to self-improvement, that it builds up morale in time of temptation, that it gives one a precise knowledge of his moral standing and makes his purpose of amendment not vague and ambiguous but specific and definite. Granted that the Sacrament is easily accessible, that does not imply any permission to sin; it is only another evidence of the gracious mercy of Christ who has made His grace so readily obtainable when one is really repentant.

Officiousness of Confessors

Another stock charge against confession is that priests use their directive office in the confessional to interfere in the private concerns of the penitent, to inject themselves into politics and business, etc. Here, again, the best refutation of the charge is the popularity of confession among practical Catholics, who find it no interference in either their private, social, fraternal or professional and business life.

True, a priest will advise a person who confesses to living in habitual sin that he or she must give it up and avoid its occasions and so will, for example, tell a man or woman living with someone to whom they are not legitimately married that they must separate, or instruct people affiliated with forbidden secret societies that they must withdraw from them, or warn penitents who confess to indulging in dangerous reading or practising birth control or committing other sins that they must not repeat them, but no one has any right to say that this is interfering in people's private affairs. This is merely helping souls to set their consciences right and keep at friendship with God. One of the very objectives of confession, outside of the formal absolution of sin, is to direct and instruct the penitent as to his or her religious and moral duties and forestall their offending God.

Paying to Forgive Sin

It is also charged against the Sacrament of Penance that people must pay to have their sins forgiven when they go to confession and consequently the poor are at a disadvantage. A kindred charge but springing from consummate ignorance is that in confession Catholics pay for the license to sin. Now, if people had to pay to have their sins forgiven, I am afraid our churches would not have the multitudes of devout poor that we see every week in them going to confession. For a priest to charge for forgiving sins would be simony, a sacrilegious selling of a holy thing. Let Protestants ask any of their Catholic friends who frequent the holy tribunal of Penance what it costs to have their sins forgiven and they will get an honest answer. As for giving permission to sin, the Pope himself can not give a person the

privilege, if it be a privilege, of breaking the least of the Commandments. The charges doubtless had their origin in the common custom, especially in the Middle Ages, of imposing alms-deeds for penance, or from the habit of making offerings to confessors just as offerings are now commonly made to them on the occasion of the administration of other Sacraments.

A Priest-made Contrivance

One sometimes hears people talk foolishly and charge that confession is a purely priestly invention, made to satisfy some abnormal whim of theirs or for some kindred but equally silly purpose. One is tempted to ask in reply, why, if priests or some Pope initiated confession, didn't they exempt themselves from its obligations? As a fact most priests will admit that while confession-hearing may be a very consoling work in as much as it brings them very close to the human soul and God's redemptive working in that soul, nevertheless it is one of their most trying tasks, physically and mentally.

Let anyone who believes this charge sit down in one of those little boxes six hours at a stretch (and many a priest spends longer stretches than that especially at Christmas and Easter) and he will discover how pleasant the work is! It is no joke when one's hands are numb in some cold church in winter or in equally cramped quarters one is forced to fight the mosquitoes in summer. Many a priest has suffered from the physical nausea that comes from breathing in the poisonous air exhaled through the screen that separates him from the penitent.

And then there is the mental strain when one is forced often for a long period together to remember what a penitent has said early in his or her confession until its end that some question might be asked about it or some advice given. And there is the test of one's patience when little children and the illiterate or the uncouth must be helped through the formula, or when all the zeal that the confessor has must be expended in trying to dispose some poor sinner to the proper attitude so that he will be ready to make his act of sorrow and amend his life.

And finally there is the awful sense of responsibility that the confessor feels before God for the work he is doing. After all, God has given him the duty of retaining or remitting sin and the weal or woe of a soul for all eternity may often depend on his judgment. He cannot do as he likes; his judgment may not be arbitrary; he must know how to mingle justice and mercy; and on the last day he will have to account to God for his administration of that Sacrament as he does for every other one of his sacerdotal functions, and there is no priest who does not realize that because much has been given him by God much will be required of him. These things are mentioned not that the reader may think that the priest in the confessional is some sort of a hero—no, even after doing his best he must say in the Gospel words that he is but an unprofitable servant—but that it may be understood, how positively absurd the suggestion is that confession is a priest-made contrivance.

Dangers to Morality

Finally, some professed conscientious objectors to confession pretend to be concerned about the perils to which it exposes the priests, particularly because they make profession of celibacy and must hear the confessions of women. Others, taking it for granted, that priests are by virtue of their very calling somehow unscrupulous rascals, decry confession because of the dangers in which it places female penitents and innocent children. Catholics who practice confession know that both these objections spring not from reason or ignorance but from prejudice. On the same score medical consultation and treatment should be opposed and abolished. Assume for the sake of argument that some confessor has abused his sacramental position, would that be sufficient reason to condemn the system itself? The system can only logically be damned if such abuse is something intrinsic to it. As well agitate the abolition of civil judges and our judicial system because some judges have proven dishonest or accepted bribes. Nor can it be subsumed that the charges of immorality associated with the confessional have a genuine foundation in fact, as is sometimes done, because the Church has made legislation about penalties for abuses. Even in the civil law legislation of that type is

often meant merely to serve as a deterrent and forestall difficulties, and does not argue actual evils. In this connection it may not be out of place to quote a hostile witness to things Catholic, Cecil J. Cadoux, who, in his "Catholicism and Christianity," writes:

> The Roman confessional also, notwithstanding the grave abuses and dangers to which it is exposed, is not only intended but is to a large extent in practice adapted, to assist individuals in their struggle against temptation, their quest for Divine forgiviness, and their aspiration after true holiness of life.

Authors and Text-books

By way of corollary to the discussion of the charges of immorality linked up with the Catholic confessional, a word might be said about the violent onslaughts that are often made in the Maria-Monk type of anti-Catholic propaganda which insinuates, if it does not openly charge, that because Catholic theologians write volumes of moral theology or Catholic seminarians study them, they must themselves be highly immoral. Of course any thoughtful, clean-minded person sees the fallacy at once. As the physician must study even the most revolting ills of the body and no one on that account would charge him with being himself physically degenerate; as the lawyer and the judge must have books and read them which will treat of the most degrading social crimes and no one thinks that the knowledge reflects on their personal integrity; so the same holds true, or should hold true of the clergyman—and it would, were it not that the people who make these aspersions, and unfortunately they are not only a handful, deliberately wish to calumniate the Church. One isn't a murderer just because he knows what murder is, and by the same token one is not a blasphemer, an adulterer, a perjurer, or the prey of unnatural vices just because he knows what those things are, especially when the very nature of his work demands that he be acquainted with them, however naturally repulsive they may be. We sometimes have the vilest charges insinuated against our Catholic moralists, Saints at that, like St. Alphonsus Liguori, in the press, on the platform, over the air, by men and women who would mislead the gullible public just to

slander the Catholic Church and her moral system and the confessional. It is hard to understand how, like vultures feeding on carrion, some men and women are never apparently more contented than when feeding on the aspersed reputations of their fellows!

A New Attitude

That the intimate relation created through the sacrament of Penance between the confessor and the penitent is not quite open to all those abuses with which traditional Protestant prejudice and ignorance and hatred have charged it, may be gathered from the fact that today both among Jewish rabbis and Protestant ministers there is a fairly wide movement to introduce into their ecclesiastical practices something akin to our Catholic confessional practices. Of course none of those who advocate this re-introduction of confession, would maintain for a moment that they can forgive sins or would exercise any judicial function, but they do emphasize that their people need the direction and teaching and moral advice that the Catholic confessional affords, and the natural relief and comfort and consolation that comes from unburdening one's soul of its sins to a sympathetic listener.

Indicative of this shifting attitude among non-Catholics was the plea made in 1927 by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Baptist, during an address to the Greater New York Federation of Churches where he openly urged the establishment of confessionals in Protestant churches for the comfort and advice of religiously sick souls. He protested that the lack of the confessional among them was driving numbers of persons to psychoanalysis and that its presence might save many from suicide.

> Christ captured the world by caring for individuals [he said]. He led no armies, was a member of no committees, fomented no political revolutions and wrote no books. It is the individual who constitutes the basis of the social structure. The method employed by Christ was not accidental. He thought life was for the building of personality. . . . If Jesus Christ came back to earth He would work through the individual.
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> We modern Protestants fail in some things. Our Roman Catholic brethren in keeping the confessional have pretty nearly wiped us off the stage in one feature of human service. Through the confessional

they have built up an amazing service for the treatment of sick souls. A good priest, through the confessional, can develop a treatment for the individual and we have nothing to compare with it.

Dr. George Caleb Moore, pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church, New York, apropos of the suggestion said:

The confessional cannot be adopted by the Protestant Faith as an institution mainly because the minister is not empowered to absolve sin. However, as a means of permitting a troubled man to get rid of his worries, an informal confession is of untold value.

Even more pointed was the comment of the Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Sockman, Madison Avenue Methodist Church:

In abandoning the confessional the Protestant Church lost one of two vital things. One of these, and the greatest loss, was that we stopped making sins specific. We Protestants have made repentance too easy, vague, and general. You cannot convict a man in a court of law without a specific charge, nor can you convict a conscience on broad general grounds. Another advantage of the confessional is that it requires the penitent to state his sins orally. This is an aid to repentance and a relief to the sinner.

Confession in the Synagogue

Taking up Dr. Fosdick's suggestion, Rabbi Samuel Thurman of the United Hebrew Temple, St. Louis, announced that personal confession would become a part of his synagogue activity.

If they seek for advice we shall try to give it to them [the Rabbi said]. If they only mean to make a declaration of sins committed and a desire to repent, they shall have the opportunity to do so with all the fullness and sincerity of their hearts. Dr. Fosdick's recent appeal to reinstate the confessional in the Protestant Church is a good sign that the Church, through its real leaders, is awakening to the responsibility which it owes to society at large and to the individual.

Establishment of a Jewish confessional was also advocated by Rabbi Leonard J. Rothstein of Temple Beth Elohim, New York City. He said:

I do not believe that any of us, no matter how thoroughly consecrated to spiritual things, can promise absolution from guilt through confession. But I am firmly of the opinion that great spiritual and moral benefits will accrue if our people are enabled to go to a spiri-

tual leader in whom they have confidence to discuss with him their troubles, their heartaches, and their problems.

We need it badly, this modified confessional, especially in this complex and hard-driven age—for one thing, as a stabilizing force amidst the instability of our times, and secondly, as a haven of refuge from the trials and tribulations and perplexities of life.

A Soul Clinic

While the practices these divines are urging are infinitely removed from the Catholic concept of confession which is no mere clinic for sick souls morally weak and in darkness, the new attitude regarding the value of the confessional even from the human and natural angle and the implicit admission that it is not necessarily open to abuse, is significant. It reemphasizes, too, what the Church has always taught that confession as one of the elements of the Sacrament of Penance fills an urgent need of the soul.

Fruits of Penance

In general it may be said of confession as of so many other things, "By their fruits you shall know them." To say nothing of the physical change that goes on in the soul when the priest absolves a penitent and sin is forgiven and sanctifying grace is again infused into that soul along with the Holy Ghost, it brings peace and joy as few things else bring them. The author has known non-Catholic young men just in the hope of sharing some of this sweetness to go to talk to Catholic priests in confession. Physicians bear witness to the morale it puts into the suffering sick and what a difference it makes for the dying. If there were not something in it, would it be that the dying would be so anxious to take advantage of it? The writer has stood at many death-beds but never once has any Catholic man positively refused to receive the Sacrament of Penance if he could. Neither has he ever met a man, especially if he had been a long while away from the Sacraments and like every priest he has had them ten, twenty, forty and more years away, who regretted that he had made his confession. He has also seen red-blooded American boys, young men in their early twenties wait zestfully in line for hours for confession as they might for entrance to a football game. There must be something in it. These people are not all

fools and the thought ought to make non-Catholics pause and think out the phenomenon.

If confession were what its enemies proclaim would our good American fathers and mothers encourage their children to frequent the holy tribunal? They know what goes on there from their own personal experience, yet even those who are careless themselves about their religious duties are often most insistent about their boys and girls regularly going to confession. Nothing needs be said of the social boon confession sometimes proves, when a penitent because of it is deterred from some contemplated crime or when he is made to make restitution of some ill-gotten goods or money or to set right some other evil he may have done.

Practical Points

From the practical angle there are several points associated with the Sacrament of Penance that ought to have explanation, notably three that arise from the priest's part in the Sacrament and three that relate to the penitent.

Jurisdiction

So far as the priest is concerned, it is necessary in the first place that besides possessing priesthood which he receives by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, he also have what is technically referred to as jurisdiction or faculties. The power of jurisdiction is that which assigns to a priest subjects over whom he can exercise the powers he received in ordination. Some jurisdiction is *ex officio* as that of the Pope over the whole Church, or of the Bishop over his diocese, or of pastors over their parishes. Other jurisdiction is delegated by some ecclesiastical superior to an inferior. Validly to hear confessions and absolve, priests must have either sort of jurisdiction. The reason is because absolution and the imposition of satisfaction such as takes place in the sacrament of Penance are judicial acts and consequently can be validly performed only by a competent judge having either ordinary or delegated jurisdiction over the penitent. Needless to say, it follows that whoever confers jurisdiction can limit its exercise and that is continually done in the Church either as regards certain classes of sins or certain classes of penitents.

The Priest's Triple Office

A second point to be noted about the relation of the priest to the Sacrament of Penance is that while primarily and fundamentally he acts as a judge during confession, with all that that implies, he is also a soul-physician and teacher. A judge is an officer clothed with public authority whose function it is to determine the guilt or innocence of accused persons and pass sentence on them. His faculties include the right to make an authoritative sentence (and in this he differs from a mere arbiter), and the further power to decide the extent of the guilt and to apply the law, which excludes arbitrariness and a too wide range of subjective opinion. This is what the priest does in administering the Sacrament of Penance. Apropos of this, Monsignor Pohle in treating of Penance calls attention to the following dissimilarities between the sacred tribunal of Penance and secular criminal courts:

> The first and chief difference is based upon their objects. Penance was instituted, primarily, not to find the sinner guilty and condemn him to condign punishment, but rather to absolve him from his crimes. A criminal court, on the contrary, exists for the purpose of punishing. If it occasionally discharges a defendant, this is pure accident. The expiatory element is not entirely lacking in the tribunal of Penance, however, for the confessor is bound to impose a penance in proportion to the sins committed.
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> A second difference between the two courts is that Penance is essentially a *forum internum* whereas a secular court is limited to the *forum externum*.
>
> A third difference consists in this that no secular judge is able to restore a contrite criminal to innocence, as does the confessor when he pronounces the sacramental absolution. If the accused is guilty, the judge has to condemn him in accordance with the law and may at most mitigate his punishment by giving him the benefit of extenuating circumstances. If he pronounces a defendant not guilty, this sentence does not effect innocence but presupposes it.

As a physician in the confessional, it is the priest's duty to do what he possibly can to heal the spiritual wounds inflicted on penitents by sins and temptations, to diagnose the causes of their spiritual maladies and suggest remedies and means to strengthen their wills.

As a teacher, it is the province of the minister of the Sacrament of Penance to remove moral ignorance in those

that confess to him, to point out what is right and wrong, good and bad, licit and illicit. This is particularly true where the penitents are young or illiterate, or evidence that they are doing things morally wrong through ignorance.

Direction in Confession

It is because they are physicians and teachers as well as judges that priests often ask questions in confession apart from the direct accusation of sins, thus, for example, questions concerning the occasions of sin to which one is exposed, or the means that are being employed to overcome some vice or bad habit. It is regrettable that people do not always properly evaluate priestly sacramental direction, much less ask for it, for very many would be substantially aided in their efforts to live virtuously were they to adopt the practice. It is on this account, too, that penitents are advised by spiritual writers to have a regular confessor. Mere absolution may be had from any confessor with jurisdiction, but direction implies that the penitent's soul is more completely known to the priest and that can only normally occur when one frequents the same confessor habitually, just as for medical advice a regular physician is better suited than a doctor that one visits occasionally.

As one writer on confession, discussing this topic says:

> The confessional lends itself particularly to fruitful admonition. Exhortation from the pulpit is often disregarded as not applicable to himself by the one who needs it most. In the confessional the warning is given in view of the particular circumstances of the individual. Moreover those who come to confession have—indeed, they must have—a sincere desire of emendation. The warning addressed to them there has, accordingly, an incomparably better chance of being heeded.

Along the same line the Rev. H. Harrington writes:

> To secure more fully the benefits of the Sacrament, Origen's advice is important: to choose our confessor carefully. Regular guidance is useful to the soul. A doctor, for complete efficiency, needs to know the medical history of his patient, and the circumstances of his life that may affect his health; so, too, the priest can help us better the more he knows of our spiritual history and of the circumstances of our life that may affect our spiritual well-being.
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> In choosing this confessor we should be guided by spiritual motives. He should be a man we find sympathetic and spiritually helpful. Normally one who knows us outside confession is able to

be of more use to us than a stranger. He knows our lives, our circumstances, our difficulties very fully, has no need to ask many questions, and is less likely to be ignorant of some fact, perhaps important, that we overlook through a failure to realize its importance. . . .

Having chosen a confessor we should help him by asking for guidance if we need it. Otherwise he may be hampered by fear of intruding on a soul and perhaps doing harm by offending his penitent.

The Secret of the Confessional

A final point to be remarked about the priest in confession is the obligation that is upon him of keeping absolutely secret what he hears in the Sacrament of Penance. This duty, the Church teaches, rests on the Divine law and admits of no exception. Its importance follows from the nature of things, and without it the administration of Penance would be impossible. No advantage for any man, no law of any State, no command of any superior, even the Pope, no evil to be averted, not death itself, can ever justify a priest breaking the seal of confession. Even indirectly he may not, because of knowledge derived from his sacramental relation to the penitent, do anything that would make confession more difficult for him. Thus, even were he to know him most intimately, he may not in his dealings with him manifest any knowledge of anything so learned, or change his attitude towards him, or allow his external conduct to be influenced by confessional knowledge.

History proves the value and necessity of these regulations, for they give confidence to the Faithful to approach any priest. It is a startling fact that while many charges have been made regarding abuses connected with the Sacrament of Penance only rarely have direct violations of the seal been alleged. In his study of the seal published a couple of years ago the Franciscan Father Kurtscheid notes that Du Fresnoy in his exhaustive examination of the subject is able to enumerate only seventeen cases in nearly two thousand years of the administration of the Sacrament in which a violation of the seal is said to have occurred, and that of this number the critic himself is prepared to cancel one-half either because there was no violation of the seal at all or because it appears more than doubtful.

From the viewpoint of the penitent something should

be said about his three acts in the Sacrament: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.

Contrition

As for contrition, which is sorrow from sin for some supernatural motive, without it there can be no valid absolution. This sorrow is not a sentiment but an act of the will, regret because one has offended Almighty God, and it necessarily implies a firm purpose not to sin again. Theologians distinguish two kinds of sorrow, attrition or imperfect, and contrition proper or perfect, sorrow. They differ in both their motives and their effects. Attrition is based on the fear of incurring the loss of heaven or the torments of hell: contrition proper is motivated by the love of God—one is sorry because he has offended the good God. While either suffices for confession, perfect sorrow has this effect that even outside of the confessional it is capable of effecting the remission of mortal sin and the restoration of the soul to sanctifying grace and God's friendship. On this account the Church urges the Faithful to cultivate the habit of making acts of perfect contrition so that should they unfortunately fall into grievous sin they need not remain in that state even until their next confession, and should death be imminent and no priest be at hand so that they could avail themselves of the opportunity for sacramental absolution, they would not risk dying in mortal sin.

Confession

As for the confession itself, it is not a mere narrative of wrong-doing but a formal accusation of one's sins. It must be made frankly and straightforwardly, without evasion or subterfuge. The penitent must tell, in number and kind, all the serious sins he has committed since his last worthy confession, so far as a careful examination of conscience may bring them to mind. This examination is careful when one devotes to it that serious attention and time which a prudent business man would give to a proportionately important task. After all, confession is a human act to be performed in a human way. Hence, if a person cannot be exact about the number of his sins he indicates them as approximately exact as he can.

For an adequate confession the penitent must include all his mortal sins of thought, word, deed or omission. It is not enough, for example, to state that he sinned seriously in thought ten times; he must state whether those thoughts were against faith, justice, purity, piety, etc., and how many of each. Likewise it isn't sufficient to say that he offended God mortally five times in word, but whether his sins were of blasphemy, perjury, slander, indecency or cursing, etc. The same holds true for acts and omissions.

On the other hand, as many outside the Church often think, using their misapprehension as a handle for calumnies against the confessional, the penitent does not have to narrate the details of his thoughts, words or acts as, for example, the blasphemous words he used or the method in which a thought against faith or an impure thought presented itself to his mind, or the circumstances, even though they be aggravating and add to the malice and shamefulness of one's conduct, of the robbery or murder or impure act he may have committed.

Details that change the nature and type of a sin must be stated but not such as merely increase and augment its guilt. Thus it would not suffice for a penitent to confess that he killed a man if that man were his father since parricide is in a different category than homicide, involving a violation of the Fourth as well as the Fifth Commandment; but in neither case would he have to say whether his crime was committed by pistol, poison or strangling. Similarly it would not be enough for a penitent to state that he had had improper relations with someone of the opposite sex without stating whether the persons involved were unmarried or married. In the one hypothesis he would have been guilty of the sin of fornication, in the other of adultery, two distinct sins since the marital infidelity involved in the latter superadds to the act of impurity common to both a violation of one's marriage vows and consequently of justice as well. On the other hand, in neither case would details associated with the sin have to be stated.

Needless to say, the penitent's confession must be of his own sins, not of the sins of others and under no circumstances must he mention names or reveal any accomplices who may have participated in his sins.

Needless to say, too, nobody ought ever deliberately conceal any mortal sin in confession, whether it be through fear or shame or any other motive. To do so not merely invalidates the confession but renders one guilty of the further grave sin of sacrilege and makes any Communion that follows equally sinful, carrying in addition the obligation before one can be said to have made a good confession, to repeat all the confessions in which the concealed sin was deliberately omitted.

Satisfaction

The last point to be mentioned is satisfaction. Sin carries with it a penalty, and a penance is imposed in confession partly to cancel this debt and partly to emphasize for the penitent the seriousness of sin and render him more watchful in the future. While in the early centuries penances used to be long and severe, quite generally now they are confined to the recitation of some prayers or other devotional acts as fasting or alms-giving. One is obliged to accept and perform the penance enjoined him by his confessor. However, if he omits to discharge a penance he has accepted, even deliberately, his confession is not invalidated nor do the forgiven sins, so to say, return. Once forgiven they are forgiven forever. However, if the omission is culpable, then one commits a new sin, mortal or venial, according as the penance was originally imposed for mortal or venial sins. In view of the fact that confessional penances have a sacramental value and consequently a particular expiatory value heavy and inconvenient penances ought to be welcomed rather than avoided.

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